Interview with Pharmacist's Mate First Class Laddie J. Vacek (1921-2006), Navy X-ray technician during World War II, who was at Saipan, Iwo Jima, and Japan's occupation. Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian, at the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, Washington, DC, 27 September 1993.

Where are you from?

I was born and raised in South Dakota--Avon, SD. I signed up at Mitchell, SD, and then really enlisted in the Navy at Sioux Falls. My enlistment date was August 17, 1942. The Great Lakes Training Station was too full at the time, so they sent us down to San Diego to boot camp.

When you enlisted, had you any idea that you were going to become a pharmacist's mate?

No, I didn't. I didn't know what I was going to be. When we got out of boot camp, they asked us if we had any choices. I wanted to be a yeoman because I worked in Washington, DC, in the winter and early spring of 1942 as a clerk-typist in the War Department, and so I thought, "Well, I'd like to be a yeoman." Well, they had too many yeomen, apparently, and not enough corpsmen, and so I got put into a receiving unit and waited to get into the corps school down at Balboa Park in San Diego. So I went to Hospital Corps School there.

What do you remember about corps school?

It was set up in temporary buildings at Balboa Park, in buildings that were built for some kind of an exposition there in 1920. We were housed in those buildings and also had our classes in one of the buildings there. I know it was practically next to the Balboa Park Zoo, which was a fabulous zoo. This corps school was in a very nice area, very picturesque and in a park-like setting. And I experienced my first earthquake down there, too.

The Hospital Corps School was very short, I think only 6 weeks or so. When we graduated, the ones with the fairly decent grades got a choice, number one, two, three choices. I asked for Oakland, CA--Oak Knoll Naval Hospital--because I had a friend from South Dakota living in San Francisco. He was working in the shipyard at the time. I was fortunate to be sent to Oak Knoll Naval Hospital.

How long were you there?

Actually, the total length of time there was from November of '42 till January of '44--about 17 months. A total of 17 months in California, but I spent from November of '42 to January '44, at Oak Knoll Naval Hospital. I started out on a cardiology ward, and by fate or irony, now my oldest son is a cardiologist. I worked as a bedpan artist in the cardiology ward. All we were doing were taking care of sick and retired regular Navy chiefs and other personnel, who were elderly cardiac patients and needed a lot of help. I certainly didn't care for that kind of duty.

Then I worked in the pharmacy for a while, filling capsules for aspirin or whatever. I finally got into X-ray school, and that was about a 6-month affair of X-ray training.

Where was that?

That was at Oak Knoll, also, right in the X-ray unit. It was very interesting and I enjoyed it very much.

Do you remember what the X-ray training consisted of?

I even have some pictures where we were practicing taking sinus and chest X-rays. Of course, the training consisted of knowing the technique in taking X-rays. Naturally, you started transcribing from dictaphone machines, transcribing doctor's X-ray reports. He'd record them on a dictaphone machine and then we had to sit there and type the reports from those dictaphone machines.

Then you graduated to the darkroom to learn how to mix the different chemicals and the time involved in developing. Then you graduated to the areas where you learned how to take sinus X-rays, chest X-rays, abdominal X-rays, and gall bladder. Of course that involved classroom training, plus on-the-job training of knowing how much time is involved in taking such and such an X-ray, how many milliamperes it would take, and also depending on the thickness of the body and the flesh and the weight of the person. It was very interesting and was good training, which I really enjoyed.

In fact, I enjoyed it so much that I would have wanted to become a doctor, and I applied for the Navy V-12 training program. Somewhere in my records I have my rejection slip, and guess what? I was rejected because I was too short to become a Navy officer, and I wanted to be a doctor.

As if your height had anything to do with your ability to be a physician.

Well, at that time, you know, an officer had to be a certain height. I don't think that would go these days with all the discrimination laws.

Not today it wouldn't. So what happened after you got finished with X-ray school?

Well, I worked in X-ray for several months.

At Oak Knoll?

At Oak Knoll Naval Hospital. Then I was transferred to the cystoscopy ward and was assigned as an X-ray technician in the cystoscopic department, where the specialty was the examination of bladders via cystoscopy--X-raying the kidney areas for kidney stones and stones in the bladder. I did that for 3 months. Very good duty. It involved injecting dye into the patients and waiting a certain time and then taking X-rays to see where the dye had--

Did you do the injecting or did a physician?

Yes, I did the injecting of the dye and then took the X-rays after a certain length of time. I developed the X-rays to determine if there was any blockage in the kidney catheters. Then I assisted the doctor while he did the actual cystoscopy examinations, of course through the penis. Also, he did some prostate shaving and removal of enlarged prostates in older men who had prostate problems, and, of course, young men that had had gonorrhea. Their urethras were pretty well constricted so they had to dilate them by--I don't even remember the name of these instruments. They were just solid metal probes that they would start with a real thin one through the urethra to enlarge it and then used a larger one. Very painful, as I observed it. Men were in pain when they....

I was on that ward for about 3 months, and all at once I was transferred to the Tanforan race track at San Bruno to what they called a Navy Cub Unit.

What was the race track?

Tanforan. It was called the Tanforan race track. It was a well-known race track in the San Francisco-Oakland Bay area, and it was located south of San Francisco in the little town of San Bruno, and we were congregated there. They sent Navy corpsmen and medical officers and other Navy personnel, medical personnel, like administrative officers, ensigns, whatever. We were assigned to a cub unit, and we were slated to go to the Russell Islands to set up a hospital. But as I can see now looking back, the war was moving fairly rapidly in the Pacific and a hospital on the Russell Islands apparently wasn't needed. They were losing hospital corpsmen by the droves, by the hundreds, in the Marine Corps because of their island-hopping. I would say 99 percent of us were put in the Fleet Marine Force and sent down to Camp Eliot, San Diego. There we were assigned to the 5th Amphibious Corps Medical Battalion. Practically every person at that race track was assigned to this 5th Amphibious Corps Medical Battalion.

What was your reaction to that?

My reaction was not very good, because from what I was hearing about corpsmen in the Marines, their life span was fairly short, and so it wasn't a very happy thought. But we got at least 6 weeks of Marine Corps training down there.

What kind of training was it?

First of all, we had to send all our Navy clothes home, get rid of our Navy uniforms, although some of them kept them to go out on liberty in Navy uniforms. And then the training consisted of field medical training--what to do under combat conditions, how to treated wounded on the battlefield.

This was at Camp Eliot?

That was at Camp Eliot, right. Of course, we were issued Marine uniforms, even dress green Marine uniforms, khakis, dungarees, bedroll, a .30-caliber carbine, a machete for, I suppose, chopping jungle vegetation, a knife, and a hospital corps kit bag that we had to carry.

Was it called a Unit 1?

It probably was. I've forgotten. So along with all the armament--I think, yeah, even a bayonet.

You didn't get a .45?

No, just the carbine. They were a shorter, lighter type rifle. And Marine shoes, helmet, helmet liner, the whole ball of wax. And, of course, we went through classroom training, field training, crawling under barbed wire. I believe they even used live ammunition, and we had to learn how to throw a grenade and rifle practice, shooting whatever.

This is not what you bargained for.

No. I joined the Navy to have a place to sleep and a place to eat. In fact, I joined the Navy because I had my greetings to be drafted in the Army. So I beat them, thinking I'd go in the Navy to avoid all that foxhole stuff and the rations, and here I end up in the Marines, in a foxhole eventually, and C and K rations.

Since I knew I was eventually going overseas, I purposely went out and bought a pair of pliers, because I heard the Japanese had a lot of gold in their teeth. So I was going to retrieve some of these gold teeth. But when I got on Saipan, and the doctors were performing some

autopsies, I had my pliers with me, and this person had some gold teeth. Well, I chickened out. I didn't pull them. And the other bodies that I saw were so bloated and smelled so bad that you didn't want to get near them. That was the end of the adventure of getting gold.

So after about 6 weeks of field medical training at Camp Eliot, we moved to a desolate area, and I imagine the reason for that was to acclimate us to wartime battlefield conditions. It was called Camp Linda Vista, which was just within a few miles of Camp Eliot, and that was really rugged. The showers were way off, cold water. Tents were set up, but it got really cold at night and we had to have some kind of a smudgy stove that really smoked and really smelled bad from the oil that they burned. We were glad to get out of there, in fact.

We finally got orders to board ship, and so that's what we did. We boarded ship in San Diego harbor and took off for Hawaii. It took us 7 days to get to Hawaii because we were zigzagging to avoid any submarines.

Was this an APA that you were on?

Right.

What was the name of that ship, do you remember?

Oh, I'd have to look at my diary to find out what APA that was. In fact, I might have it here, if you want to--

We can check it later.

I'm sure I have it written on one of my newsletters that I put out after our second reunion. I got all the names of the ships together, and I put it on one of the letterheads.

But it took us 7 days to get to Hawaii, and that was really an experience, because practically everyone on board ship got seasick. The GI cans were full. I finally just stayed in my bunk and used my helmet for a vomit receptacle. We were ordered to get up for boat drill and fire drill, and then I'd usually get up topside. I was just vomiting so bad that it was finally just green bile. But many of the people, the troops, were sick, really seasick. Even some of the crew. It was kind of rough. Finally, we got to Hawaii.

That must have looked pretty good to you when you got on dry land again.

It was very good. They sent us to a place called Tent City. It was called a transit center, and was located between Pearl Harbor and Honolulu. It was strictly a Marine transit center, just acres and acres of tents. That's where we stayed for a few weeks, and we got orders--well, the Saipan invasion campaign was formulated, and we finally boarded ships and went on and made the invasion of Saipan. Oh, while we were waiting in Hawaii--and this is something that probably didn't get into the newspapers in the States--they were loading the ship for the invasion of the Saipan.

The big explosion.[1]

[1] **In May 1944, in preparation for the Saipan invasion LST 353 exploded in Pearl Harbor, HI. The conflagration destroyed five other LSTs and killed 163 as well as injuring 396.**

Yes, a big explosion on some of the ammunition ships. It was disastrous, because a lot of our corpsmen and doctors were called out there to help. I wasn't called, for some reason or other, but it was really a sad situation.

Did you hear it go off?

Yes. There were bodies up on telephone poles. It was an awful situation. Of course, I didn't see it personally, but some of our men went down there to help.

But you heard it happen?

Yes. Real bad. So then we finally got loaded, also.

You left Hawaii, on your way to Saipan. You had your battalion and all the Marines that were connected with it. Was that also an APA you left Hawaii on?

Yes.

It wasn't the same one you came on?

No. Every time we were transported, it was a different APA, a different troop ship. I believe they were all APAs.

So you got to the vicinity of Saipan, and that was in June of '44?

Right, June of '44.

Did you anchor offshore?

Yes. We anchored offshore while they were softening them up. In fact, we had a few Japanese planes fly over. Of course, everyone really headed for down below decks. We stayed on board for several days until a beachhead was secured. I think they called it Yellow Beach, near the little village of Sharinkinoa [phonetic]. When we finally landed, that's where we set up a hospital, at Sharinkinoa. It was really pretty well shelled from artillery and bombing.

You could watch all this softening-up activity from the deck. What did you see?

A lot of explosions, a lot of smoke, and at night the planes would shoot out flares to light up the area, and it was like a regular Fourth of July fireworks display. Every so often they'd hit either an ammunition dump or, I suppose, some gasoline dump, and it would really blow up with a lot of smoke and fire. In the daytime, of course, it showed up as smoke.

The company I was in, Company C, set up a hospital in what formerly was a geisha house. It had rooms where they had billiard pool tables. And then there were rooms like little bunk beds or booths. I don't know if they were entertainment for the men and the girls, but there was an area there with little cubbyholes with beds like little bunks, and so they used that place for wards. In fact, I got dengue fever while I was there and was hospitalized for several days.

I had read somewhere where the Marines took over some of the Japanese buildings, and you had mentioned the geisha house.

That's when we first landed. We first took over these buildings in the village of Sharinkinoa, not too far from Garapan. Garapan was the place where there was a sugar mill. Sharinkinoa was more inland. I could see that at one time it must have been a very nice village, well laid out. I then set up my X-ray in a little building. I had to put it together because it was

all shot up. I also had to make my own darkroom and set up a portable generator and the X-ray machine.

They hadn't completely subdued the place yet, had they?
No, they hadn't.

So there was still active fighting going on.
There was still active fighting up in the jungle, the mountain area, and also the far end of the island, where they were pushed to the far end of the island where there were some steep cliffs. Many of the civilians and Japanese military had congregated there, and the propaganda was, I guess, that we would annihilate them or that we would treat them badly, and so hundreds of them jumped off the cliff and committed suicide. But I didn't see that.

You didn't actually see that.
I didn't actually see that, no. But later on, we drove around the island. We took kind of a tour around the island and saw the area where this transpired. Of course, at that time there was an Army division there. The 27th Army Infantry Division, I think was there. They took quite a beating on that island, as I recall. The Japanese would kill them at night and dress in their uniforms. There were enough of them that could speak English, and they'd entice them by calling. Finally, in order to find out if you were Japanese, Marine, or Army, the sentries would ask about baseball, certain baseball players. If they couldn't answer, then you knew they were the enemy.

We were there for a while until they secured the island. And then when they were ready to invade Tinian, which was right across the channel, we moved the whole hospital over to the shore opposite Tinian and set up the hospital, this time mostly in tents--operating room, X-ray tent, pharmacy, and so on. When they invaded Tinian, they brought the wounded over across the channel in boats to us for X-rays and operations and whatever. Right next to us, the Seabees started building the airfield where that B-29 [Enola Gay] eventually took off for Japan.

So it was a tent hospital.
Right.

From there you went over to Tinian?
I didn't go to Tinian at all. We set up our hospital on Saipan Island, opposite the island of Tinian, and when they invaded it, they brought the wounded over to our hospital.

It wasn't that far away. You could see it right across the channel.
Right across the channel, you could see it. It was a very narrow channel there.

Taking Tinian was fairly simple after Saipan.
Yes. It was a matter of just a few days. I don't even recall how many days it took, but it didn't take too long.

Do you remember how your X-ray tent was set up?
Well, I lived in the same tent, because I had to be available for X-rays anytime, so I had a cot there. And in one corner, I set up my darkroom with the chemicals, and that was a problem

because this was a tropical island, and to keep the stuff at the right temperature was practically impossible. Then I had my generator. I believe I must have had the generator outside the tent, because it was pretty noisy. Then inside I had the portable X-ray unit and a plain, old wooden table of some sort for the patients to lie on when they brought them in, or a chair to sit in, depending on what kind of X-rays I took. I must have had some kind of rudimentary flat table for the patients to lie on.

You were a one-man show, though. You didn't have any help.

That's right. I didn't have any assistance at all. I was it for my company. Each company had their own X-ray technician, and so I was the one for Company C.

How long were you on Saipan?

We were there from June till about August of '44, about 3 months. I imagine someone else set up a more permanent-type dispensary and hospital to take care of the wounded. We were sent back to Hawaii to Tent City in August. Somewhere in my diary I have the dates when we left and arrived. While we were on the way back to Hawaii, one of our personnel was injured rather severely. Down in the hold of the ship we went back on, there was a cub airplane they used for scouting. For some reason or other, the hatch wasn't covered and one of our men fell down and landed on the airplane and was pretty badly injured. He recuperated and stayed with us, but ever since then he's been a civilian and he's been racked with pain. He lives near Columbia, MO, and he's constantly being monitored at the Veterans Hospital there. He's in constant pain because of that fall into the hold. And one of our young doctors on the way back, and apparently before we even embarked, turned psycho. He went off the deep end, and they finally had to transfer him to some psychiatric ward when we got back to Hawaii. He just broke down, apparently, from whatever transpired. He was fairly young.

So there you were in Tent City getting ready for your next campaign.

That's right. We went back to Tent City, back to Honolulu. We went through some maneuvers in the area and finally took off I believe it was about January 16, 1945 and headed for Iwo Jima. On the way up, we stopped at Saipan Island and did some maneuvers off Tinian and Saipan in some very rough seas, practicing landing, going over the side on these nets into the landing boats. The seas were so rough that one or two people got injured so bad that they couldn't continue on the campaign. I think they took them off.

Did you have to go over the nets, too?

Oh, yes. That was a scary experience. And loaded with your pack and everything and your first-aid kit and a rifle.

You had everything, your carbine and your kit and all your gear just like a Marine.

That's right.

So you went over the side in the cargo net down into the landing craft.

The cargo net down into the landing craft. And then we'd circle around, and, of course, again it was so rough, and me being prone to seasickness, sick again. [Laughter]

So finally those maneuvers ended, and we finally rendezvoused and started off. I got so seasick later on that I was hospitalized for several days. They had to feed me intravenously.

You were dehydrated.
I finally got over that, though.

Where did they send you to the hospital?
I was in the sick bay on board ship.

On the APA?
Yes. They had a dispensary, sick bay. So I went there.

Probably nothing wrong with you that good dry land wouldn't have cured.
Right. Right. I was pretty sick at first, but finally--at least that was clean and smelled better than down in the hold.

So finally we hove into sight of Iwo Jima the morning of February 19th. That was D-Day. Of course, there were a lot of fireworks there then. The assault troops from the other ships, the first wave went in, and the second wave, and I don't know how many waves. For several days that raged, and we just were biding our time to wait until they secured a beachhead.

In the meantime, I saw one of our planes flying over get hit and catch fire. I took a picture of it and another picture, and then I saw someone jump out of it and the chute never opened and he plunged into the sea.

After several days of beach landings, one day I saw the leg of a Marine float by. Later on the rest of the body floated by. I suppose he got hit going into the beach while they were wading in.

I don't know what day it was we went in. The beach was secured around the base of Mount Suribachi, and that's where we landed first, about 3:30 in the morning or something. I know it was dark. First, we had to load up the LST with our trucks and equipment and supplies, and then we went on in.

What do you remember about that trip in?
That was pretty scary. When we landed--in the meantime--a lot of the guys thought they'd never use their gas masks, so they never took them with them and left them behind or threw them away. The first night on the beach, we had an alert for gas masks. Someone thought that some gas had exploded or that they were using gas on us. Well, those that didn't have their gas masks learned--one of the things in Hospital Corps School or in field medical training was that if you didn't have a gas mask that you urinate on a towel and put that over your face. Well, some of them were scrambling for towels and for anything they could find to put over their faces. It really turned out that it was some other kind of chemical that got hit, and it really was not warfare gas, which was, of course, a relief.

You were now on the beach right below Suribachi at this point and it was 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning.
Right. Right after 3:30 in the morning.

How long did it take you to get from the APA to the beach, do you remember, roughly?

It didn't take too long, probably less than an hour. I don't even remember. Things were happening so fast.

You probably weren't even conscious of time.

It seemed like so much confusion and so many things going on. I know I had to help with the loading of the LST (**Are you sure it was an LST? Could it have been another type of landing craft?)** from the ship, with our jeeps and our trucks swinging in the air from cables and scurrying around.

When you went ashore at Iwo Jima, how many days was it after D-Day?

It had to be at least 9 days.

Nine days after?

Yes, at least. I'd have to look in my diary, but I'm sure it was at least 9 days. It had to be long enough to secure the beach, part of the beach. While we were, of course, waiting, we saw all this action--planes, dive bombers, rocket attacks. At that time, they had these multiple rockets that would shoot out I don't know how many, half a dozen at a time from small boats that would go up and down the shore just sending rockets into the cliffs and all over. It certainly didn't soften them up too much, because they were just holed up in their caves. Really, it seemed like they didn't do too much damage to the personnel. Of course, it did a lot of damage to the exposed coast artillery and antiaircraft guns. But they were sure dug in in their bunkers, and on Mount Suribachi, also.

While you were still aboard and the battle was raging ashore, did you know what was going on? Did you get reports so you knew what was happening?

Yes. They kept us pretty well informed by radio announcements at certain times, and it seems to me they did publish some kind of a little news bulletin. I think I have some of them with me. But we got an occasional report on the progress, how it was progressing on shore.

So you made it ashore, and you talked about the gas attack. What happened after that?

Then, of course, daylight came and it was just mass confusion on the beach. I mean, so many different units and so much equipment being landed, supplies. There were just rows and rows and piles and piles of all kinds of supplies. One of our companies finally set up a tent hospital right at the foot of Mount Suribachi nearby. But we waited until they secured part of the beach over the ridge away from us, on the other side, which was the narrow end of the island. When that was secured, we moved all our equipment. By that time, we got it pretty well organized, and we moved over on the other side of the ridge, first near number one airfield and set up our hospital. Companies B and C, and headquarters company, I believe, set up there, too.

What did the hospital consist of at that time? What did you have as far as number of tents?

We had several ward tents with rows and rows of cots where patients would be housed, following surgery or after X-raying. And then we had a surgical tent and a pharmacy tent, a laboratory tent that was pretty close to the surgical tent. I again had my X-ray tent not too far away.

And, of course, it was very difficult to really get anything set up or stabilized because it was not really soil. It was just volcanic rock and gravel, real, real easy to get bogged down in. And so it was difficult to get our tents anchored, because the wind was blowing pretty hard, too. But one corpsman that had transferred into our outfit in the Marshall Islands had a lot of experience and he knew how to secure these tents. I recall him saying that he got hold of some lines and rope and some kind of iron anchor-type things, and got the tents anchored so well that the officer asked him, where he learned to do that.

He said he had learned it in the Marshalls which were very flat and where there was a lot of wind.

The Marine cooks that were with us also had a tent. The Marine drivers had a tent. The Marine guards had a tent. We had a certain number of Marine personnel assigned to us, and I wish I had the roster of who they. I just have a few names. Those cooks really did a wonderful job under such adverse conditions. In no time, they set up a regular galley and cooked. Instead of being on C or K rations, they were able to cook this dehydrated stuff in bulk, and they did a good job. Then we would line up during chow time.

But anyway, we had all these tents--ward tents, surgical tents, supply tents, lab tent, pharmacy tent, my X-ray tent where I had to set up the darkroom and, of course, that was also my place to sleep. That's where we were until the island was secured.

You say you got there on, let's say, day nine, and you were there for a good long time after that, until the island was completely secured.

Towards the end of March, about March 22nd.

You must have had a lot of business.

We were fairly busy, and yet there was an Army hospital, also, on Iwo. In fact, at the last gathering in Omaha, Nebraska--the first Friday of each month, the Iwo Jima survivors in the Omaha area get together at different restaurants, and at the last gathering, the second Friday in September, we went out and had a gathering at a lakeside home. There were two new Marines there that I hadn't met before who also had been on Iwo Jima. When they were wounded, they were treated at an Army hospital.

That was the first time I learned there was a real sophisticated Army hospital also set up on Iwo. It must have been close to Suribachi. This Marine told me how his hip was shot up and he ended up in an Army hospital. So we weren't the only one. Then, of course, as soon as they cleared the first airfield, they began evacuating the real serious ones by air.

And then there were hospital ships also anchored off the island, where many of the wounded were taken. I don't even know the names of the hospital ships.

Let's face it, with 5,000-plus casualties--I mean, dead-- there were a lot of wounded. We only took care of a few of the wounded compared to what all the others were taking care of. Here I'm learning this after I'm out, after all these years. After the part of the island around Mount Suribachi was secured, some of our officers were able to get Marine drivers to take them around in jeeps. That's how I've got some of these pictures of those Marine cemeteries there on Iwo. Of course, I was confined to being an X-ray technician, and being an enlisted man, I couldn't go wandering around to see any sights, so to speak.

Were you a first class [petty officer] at this point?

Right. I was a first class pharmacist's mate. They called us pharmacist's mates, which is a misnomer because we were not pharmacists. We were really hospital corpsmen, and there were specialties like X-ray techs and lab techs and so on. But at that time you either were a pharmacist's mate third class, second class, first class, and chief. I got up to be first class. That was equivalent to, I think, a tech sergeant in the Army and Marines.

Before we even got the hospital set up at the foot of Mount Suribachi, I did get to go up to Mount Suribachi where the Marines' famous flag was planted and got to look over the island.

What were your impressions when you got to the top? What kind of emotions did you have?

Well, you saw this expanse. Well, it really wasn't that big. The island was fairly small. But as far north as you could see, there was still fighting going on at the far end, or from the middle to the far end. And here I'm at the other end roaming around on Mount Suribachi. And that was even before we set up our battalion hospital.

The battalion hospital was set up at the foot?

One company set up at the foot of it, and B and C Company went over the ridge on the other shore, on the other side, opposite where we landed. We went over the ridge opposite the airfield, and that's where we set up our battalion hospital.

What you encountered up there must have been a mess. It just must have been a mess, torn apart.

Well, there were no roads; it was just this black volcanic sand. It was just chaos, really. Of course, they'd be bringing in the casualties on these ambulance jeeps, and taking care of them the best we could. After we had the hospital set up for a while, one night a bunch of the Japanese still in caves inside this mountain came storming out of there one night, all drunked up on sake. They really took a bunch of Marines by surprise. But they didn't last too long. They got rid of them in a hurry. But that wasn't too far from where we had the battalion hospital set up.

You heard all this going on?

Yes.

Did you hear the Japanese yelling and screaming?

That I didn't hear, no.

But you heard the shooting going on?

Yes. I did get to a quartermaster dump, as I mentioned before, and found a pair of new Japanese Army shoes wrapped in a March 1941 Los Angeles Times newspaper.

That was on Iwo, too?

That was on Iwo. And here they had bombed Pearl Harbor in December of '41. So they were getting supplies from us in March of '41, because these Japanese shoes were wrapped in a March 1941 Los Angeles newspaper.

So you were on Iwo until March, until it was secured?

About March 22nd.

Where did you go from there?

Then we got loaded up on the USS President Monroe, a converted luxury liner. We had casualties aboard, and I remember one in particular. He was an injured Navy corpsman who had been with the Marines. He needed a blood transfusion, so I volunteered. They gave him a direct blood transfusion from me to him. I mean, we got hooked up in the sick bay. But he died from his injuries, either from my blood or from his injuries, because we buried him at sea. That was one of the saddest things I've seen.

You must have seen a lot of sad things. Had you known him?

No, I didn't know him. They sewed him up in that canvas and let it--and we had, of course, a service there and "Taps," slid off into the sea. That was really sad. In fact, I think that was Easter Sunday.

He had been injured on the island?

He had been injured on the island, and he needed a transfusion. And so I volunteered for transfusion, and, like I say, it was a direct from me to him, no plasma, no nothing. It was a direct transfusion. I hope he didn't die from my blood, because when I was in high school I had--oh, what do they call that? You get all yellow.

Jaundice?

Jaundice. Yes. In fact, when I got out of the service, I volunteered to give blood to the Red Cross, and finally when they learned I had jaundice, they wouldn't take any more blood from me. Then it occurred to me, I wonder if that poor guy died because of the transfusion rather than from his wounds. So who knows?

It's probably unlikely he died from your blood, because you probably would have had symptoms yourself if you had jaundice.

Well, no. I don't know what it does to your blood, but, of course, I got over that yellow jaundice. It was just a matter of a week. You know, you get real yellow. I was a young kid, and that passed. But then later on when in civilian life, they wouldn't accept my blood because I had yellow jaundice. So who knows?

We had several wounded on board. The USS President Monroe was a pretty good size, so we had a lot of troops aboard. That was a fairly pleasant trip back. That was one time I didn't get seasick going back.

And you ended up in the same place again?

This time we landed on Maui. In fact, when we landed in Maui at the port, they announced over the loudspeaker system that President [Franklin Delano] Roosevelt died. So I think that must have been April 12, 1945, and I think we left Iwo about March 22nd, or somewhere in that area.

When we landed on Maui, we took over an Army hospital there, set up a hospital, and took care of the 4th Marine Division. They had their headquarters on Maui, and so we took care of their sick and injured. So there again, I ran the X-ray room, and, of course, we had modern

equipment there and a regular barracks and regular wooden buildings, as permanent as they could be.

We got there in April, and it was fairly restful. It wasn't so uptight, because the Iwo campaign was over with and they were--

Getting ready for Okinawa.

They were getting ready for Okinawa or were--

They were already there.

They were there, yes. The Okinawa campaign was on, and they took Okinawa. And then, of course, there were the kamikaze attacks on the ships and then they dropped the two bombs. Then we celebrated. I remember we also celebrated VE-Day. Yeah, we celebrated VE-Day there. We had a regular service.

In May.

In May of '45, right. I remember. I have pictures of that, where we had some services. And then they dropped the two [atomic] bombs, and, my gosh, within a week or so, we headed for Sasebo, Kyushu, Japan, just like as we would have invaded it. In fact, we went to the same area where we would have invaded if the war wouldn't have ended.

Do you remember your impressions when you heard the bomb had been dropped?

Well, we were all elated. It was great. Wonderful. We're going home! And here, lo and behold, many of our personnel were transferred to the 4th Marine Division on the island. Some of them by some reason or other got transferred to some other units, some were able to go home, and a bunch of us went as the 5th Amphibious Corps Medical Battalion to Sasebo, Japan.

You hadn't been part of the rehearsals for the big invasion of the Japanese home islands then, had you?

No.

You were in Maui. You were doing your own thing while the rehearsals were under way for invading the home islands.

Some of them probably were somewhere. But we weren't in on any of the rehearsals because we didn't even realize that that's where we would have invaded or where we would land, until we got on board ship. We were within 40 miles of Nagasaki when we got to Sasebo.

For occupation.

For occupation. And it was just--it was futile, because we didn't do anything there. We took over a Japanese naval hospital, and I don't recall that I took one X-ray there.

What was that like? What was your impression? Here you are. There's the enemy. You're in the land of the enemy.

That's right. Now we're on real foreign territory. Iwo Jima, of course, was Japanese. Saipan Island was not always Japanese. It was Spanish, German, and finally the Japanese were there. But Iwo, as I understand it, was always Japanese. But here we came to a modern-day city

of Sasebo, and as we went in the harbor, it was quite an inland harbor, we saw all these terraced hillsides that were farmed, really farmed with nice terraces. It was kind of nice.

But when we got into the harbor, into the port, well, there we saw the destruction of our aircraft and of our fire bombing. Oh, I think 60 percent of that city was destroyed--fire bombed, shot up. A few of the cargo-handling derricks on the docks were still in operation, and so we were able to unload the ship with the help of those derricks or Japanese cranes.

But it was kind of a dingy, rusty-type-looking city. Everything was kind of brown and rusty. Equipment on the docks was rusting. It was just chaos. People were aimlessly walking around. And the people, well, they pretty much ignored us. I took one liberty while I was there. It was interesting to see the people. The women walked several steps behind the men, and they were subdued and didn't say anything.

The men didn't, either?

No, no, no. Another fellow and I or several of us went to a Japanese theater to watch a Japanese movie. Then we went to a railroad station, and I was surprised. Here I was in the rest room, and there were Japanese women right next to you, because it didn't make any difference, men or women, they used the same rest rooms in the Japanese railroad station. I went to a post office to buy some stamps and went to this theater, and some of the younger girls smiled. And then we were wandering around, and pretty soon I noticed that a lot of the--not a lot, but several of the Japanese girls were standing around in front of these buildings that were all tiled, with covered tile--yellow, red ceramic tile. Pretty soon, a Marine guard said, "What are you doing here? You're in a restricted area. You're not supposed to be here." And he wrote me up a ticket. We got out of there, of course. We said we didn't know we were in a restricted area. It was their red-light district. [Laughter] So that was my one and only liberty in Sasebo.

You didn't have any fear of walking around the streets? These people were really--

No. They were very subdued and, of course, everything was wrecked, shambles. No.

Did you notice the people looked hungry?

No. They were polite. That was one thing. They were very polite. They did a lot of bowing and were very polite. Of course, none of them spoke English. I didn't run up against any of them that spoke English, and, of course, we didn't talk to any of them, either. But we did get into the theater some way. By that time we were paid in yen, and I guess we had to pay a stipend.

What month was this? Was this in October, do you think?

This must have been the end of September and early October, because we were trying to get this hospital set up to be used, and I don't know if we had any patients or not. I don't even recall having any patients there. I do recall going into the mountainside. There was a mountain right next to it, a hillside that was interlaced with tunnels, and they had regular operating rooms and X-rays and everything inside this mountain. We would have had a heck of a time invading that place. But I don't recall having any patients there. We were billeted in a building that leaked. The plumbing was bad, the lights were just so dim, and when it rained, the rain came in.

Were you still running an X-ray shop there? What was your day like?

We were just there.

Just there to occupy.

Yes, just there. We didn't really do anything. The Marine cooks, as I recall, didn't even have anything to really set up a good galley.

Pretty soon, I had my points or something and they said, "Go back to the States. You're going to go back to the States." But I know I didn't do any treatment of anyone or take any X-rays that I recall. Everything was just kind of a haze when we were there. It rained. I don't think we had one sunny day. It was just a dreary area, very depressing.

You only had the one liberty while you were there?

One liberty.

You stayed in your little billet there. You must have been bored to tears.

Oh! I tried to write letters, and I don't even know if I got--I must have gotten some mail there. I know I went to a hospital building, and one of our corpsmen was an electrician or tinkerer and tried to get the telephones working. I just don't recall taking care of any patients there. We probably had some first-aid-type stuff, but I wasn't involved in it. But as far as X-ray--

You certainly didn't take care of any of the Japanese. There weren't any of those people coming in for treatment.

No. There were some Japanese women that were coming in to help clean up or do something. I recall that they were around supposedly to help us to do something, I suppose clean up or whatever.

So you left there in October.

October. Right. And got back--

You were out then. You were ready to go home.

Yes. We got packed up. I mean, we didn't have to pack up any equipment or anything this time.

You never unpacked any.

No, I doubt if it got unpacked. I don't recall unpacking any X-ray equipment there. But I do know that we were supposed to have some kind of a baggage inspection or something. I don't know if they were afraid we were going to carry the place away.

I got hold of a chief's wardrobe bag, and had that filled up with my extra Marine clothing or whatever. I hid that under a stairwell until the inspection was over with, and I got that on board ship.

When we got to the ship and as we were loading it, a Marine or Army truck drove up with a whole truckload of Japanese rifles. As we boarded the ship, they handed a rifle to each of us troops. They wanted to get them out of the country. And later on I heard that you couldn't take anything out of the country. Here we were fortunate enough to--I suppose someone in that area gave out an order to get rid of as many of the rifles as they could.

So you went home with a Japanese rifle.

Right. And I also bought one from one of the other corpsmen. I guess he probably wanted the money. I don't even remember what I paid him for it. I've got those two home.

I'm going to digress a little. Leaving Saipan Island, I got hold of a .25-caliber sniper rifle, and got it back to Hawaii. I sent it back with someone on a Marine inspection team that I got acquainted with. I also gave him a trunkful of other stuff that I got on Saipan, diaries and all that. And I told him to send it to my parents. Well, I only had a tag on it, didn't have it boxed up. It never got home. Some railway express guy or railroad guy has a .25-caliber sniper rifle.

But you still have the other ones.

Right. I have one left. I sold one to my wife's cousin later on, years later after I got acquainted with my wife and married her. This cousin of hers bought it from me, and I should have kept it. But I do have the one. I have the original one I got when getting on board ship. It has a little plastic cover for the end of the barrel, and it's in pretty good shape. I also got hold of a Japanese bayonet on Saipan with the handle burned off, so I fixed up the handle. Now I've got a complete bayonet and rifle. And on Saipan I got a Japanese army helmet and a Japanese grenade.

You came home with some booty, then, didn't you?

Yes, a few things.

I think the best booty are your diaries.

My diaries and myself came back.

And you came back in one piece.

Right. It was an experience that you wouldn't want to go through, but you wouldn't take any money not to have had it.

That's what a lot of veterans have told me. They wouldn't go through it again, yet those I spoke with said that in many ways the experience was the culminating adventure of their lives.

It was but they wouldn't go through it again, that's true.